Valuing the place of young people with learning disabilities in the arts

Valuing the place of young people with learning disabilities in the arts

Introduction: Valuing the place of young people with learning disabilities in the arts

Young people with a learning disability have little say in the professional arts in the UK, and indeed the world over. There are plenty of arts activities for them to be involved with, but little representation of them in the professional arts. This schism is even more pronounced in Northern Ireland, where a grass-roots, rights-based approach to disability has not begun to emerge until much more recently than the rest of the United Kingdom. There are, however, both local and international examples of exciting and innovative work in which actors with learning disabilities are looking to practice their art-form professionally. This article looks at two of these: a group of young people with learning disabilities with the youth theatre company Kids in Control (KIC), Belfast, who are considering a future in the theatre; and young professional actors at Moomsteatern in Malmö, Sweden. Firstly, a practice-based research project charts the process of young actors at KIC in exploring what is important to them in their transition into adulthood, and the options available to them in expressing this through drama and theatre beyond school and college. The findings from this practice are then extended by looking at the work of professional actors with learning disabilities at Moomsteatern who operate within the Swedish relational model of disability, rather than the social model of disability more commonly adhered to in the United Kingdom. I argue that there are facets of the relational model missing from a social model approach to disability which offer a useful lens through which to consider the facilitation of professional practice, particularly in relation to young people with a learning disability within the context of Northern Ireland.

Context: The Facilitator, the Facilitated and Questions of Power

The mediator role (or as it is referred to in this context: the facilitator) is key to developing the artistic practice of performers with a learning disability. “Good practices” and how these are decided upon and measured involve the mediation and involvement of non-disabled persons who are required to take on a facilitative role. This is different to the needs of disabled people who do not have a cognitive impairment, and do not require non-disabled people to be involved in facilitating production of the work as well as in assisting with access needs (Perring, 2005: 175). This raises all sorts of political and ethical questions in facilitating the opinion, or “voice” of a person with a learning disability: what are the aims of the facilitation? What is the benefit to the person? What happens if facilitation does not take place or goes wrong? Who makes judgments within the processes of the drama? How can the facilitator be sure they are acting on behalf of the person with a learning disability? These questions pertain to power and ownership of the performance material created, as well as social interactions beyond the workshop floor. However, very little has been written on the development of the performer

in relation to learning disability (Gee & Hargrave, 2011: 37), and what is available tends to be focused on the experience of the performer, with less focus on how facilitation takes place, or the relationship between facilitator and performer. Some of these questions are raised by Goodley and Moore (2002) in relation to what they term performing arts projects and people with learning difficulties (which includes those with learning disabilities). Goodley and Moore in *Disability Arts Against Exclusion* set out an indication of the agendas of people with learning difficulties in creating performance. They also seek to offer a "critical commentary for those involved in the provision of performing arts opportunities" (2002: 4). As such, their writing is not concerned first and foremost with facilitative practice but, given the need for mediation and facilitation as indicated above, this theme is touched on a number of times. They describe the performing arts worker as director, facilitator and follower (2002: 53). However, as they acknowledge themselves, their research is not carried out from the perspective of the arts professional, echoing "customary criticisms of ethnographic and observation research..." (2002: 186). Thus, key terms within (applied) arts practice, such as "facilitation"' and "performing arts" are not clearly defined. I would posit that locating their research within a purely disability studies and civil rights approach to disability arts serves to undermine their aim to raise the profile of performing arts by people with learning difficulties. A greater focus on the arts, facilitation and training is needed in order to do this.

Wooster suggests an inclusive approach to the arts – "'inclusive' in that it is made up of both non-learning disabled and learning-disabled members of the community" (2009: 80) – rather than a social model of disability approach. The social model can in practice be exclusionary to non-disabled participants/practitioners who are often needed to facilitate *with* actors with a learning disability, and therefore negates the principles of empowerment and increased autonomy which disability rights advocates for. Empowering structures should certainly incorporate the attitudinal aspects of the social model within its inclusive practices, but with an emphasis on non-disabled participants as co-creators, not controllers, of the artistic work (Wooster, 2009). Ineland (2005 refers to a "weaker", or relational, social model approach which moves away from the "strong" disabled-led approach and is more akin to the World Health Organisation International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Impairment (ICF). This is considered in more depth later on in relation to the Swedish context.

Methodological Context: Applied Drama, Action Research and different kinds of knowing

According to Helen Nicholson: The "participatory, dialogic and dialectic qualities as effective and democratic ways of learning", which advocates of applied drama expound, encourage interactivity and collaboration which is at the same time active and critical (2005: 38). She goes on to state:

> As a practice, it is generally understood that knowledge in drama is embodied, culturally located and

> socially distributed. This means that knowledge is produced through interaction with others, and that this reciprocity between participants generates new forms of social and cultural capital. (Nicholson 2005: 39).

Nicholson states that through experiencing the physical action of drama, in a specific context and in democratic collaboration with others, new social and cultural understanding can be produced. This kind of approach utilises participatory action research methods, which in turn facilitate the creation of a praxis-based feedback loop uniting all parties. Praxis is distinguished from practice by the necessity to question motives, and critically analyse processes and outcomes. (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead 2002: 8).

Research "with" rather than "on" people in participatory action research involves four different kinds of knowing: experiential (through meeting and encounter), presentational (through use of aesthetic, expressive forms), propositional (through words and concepts) and practical (in the exercise of diverse skills). Transformative inquiries involving action, where people change their way of being and doing and relating in their world, is based on practical knowing-how, which realises the other three forms (Heron & Reason, 2006, p.145). Thus having the right practices in place is thus essential in engaging a group of people who are marginalised by traditional modes of learning, and is necessary for the conditions by which young people can become professional actors in their own right. The principles of applied drama and participatory action research therefore form the basis of the practice-based research project outlined here.

Methodology: Practice-based Research with Kids in Control , Belfast - Investigating Transitions to the Professional Arts

During 2010 I began developing a working relationship with David Calvert, Artistic Director of KIC – Northern Ireland's only physical youth theatre company – along with KIC participants and other KIC staff members. I was first introduced to KIC at the beginning of 2010, when I observed some of their "Core" group workshops with approximately 10 young people with learning disabilities. Over the course of the following year, I gradually got to know the young people as I continued to observe their practice.

For more than a decade KIC has been working with young people with a learning disability to create innovative movement and dance-based theatre. Using movement improvisation and physical imagery reminiscent of Boal's techniques in *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (2002), they devise the content of performance that weaves their personal stories into often fantastical and fragmented

narratives.[1] KIC takes a long-term view of engaging young people in the work that they do, and workshops operate within a carefully constructed framework. If the young people demonstrate the necessary commitment to the dramatic process over time, they are able to continue to the Core group who perform several times a year to public audiences. The work of KIC thus reflects the "collaborative and sustained" transformative process indicated by Nicholson, whereby transformation is "a gradual and cumulative process, the result of learning and negotiation with others, a progressive act of self-creation. (2005: 12).

However, for the Core group participants who have "grown up" with the theatre company and are now becoming young adults with the requisite skills and desire to take the next step on their artistic journey, the question remains: where do they go from here? The research finding by Goodley and Moore (2002) and Gee and Hargrave (2011) which highlight the lack of role models and training opportunities for young people and particularly those with disabilities to enter the professional arts, is even more pronounced within Northern Ireland. Consequently, at the time of writing, it is unclear what artistic opportunities are available for KIC Core group members if they wish to continue with drama and theatre to the next level.

Although KIC has an enormous amount of workshop and good practice experience in the area of learning disability, the focus had previously been on the artistic, the aesthetic and the performance experience. As a result, there had been no explicit adherence to human rights agendas such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities , and no social approach to disability beyond the intuition of the artistic director and the workshop assistants. There was limited input into the structural processes of the theatre company by disabled people, and the disabled participants had less input into the kinds of knowledge generation necessary for pedagogies of social justice. This has arguably contributed amongst disabled participants to a lack of support for autonomous decision-making (as advocated by the United Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities), with the result that they are marginalized in their own artistic development.

The Rationale for Practice-based Research to Explore "Where to Now?"

In response to the need for developing role models and leadership potential with the young adults with a learning disability, I proposed two series of practice-based research workshops over a five-month period. It is the first of these that is referred to in this article, and which was conducted in

[1] KIC productions have been well documented photographically and on film. Additionally, audience responses and testimonies by participants, audience members, funders and schools have been systematically collected by KIC and are available from the company. Further information on the company can be found at www.kicproject.co.uk

August 2011 with seven core members aged 16-28 who had been performing with KIC for up to 10 years. This was a chance for the young people to begin investigating the question of "Where to Now?" with the intention of considering how they might develop as role models, and particularly for those with disabilities. With a focus on what they can do, rather than on what they cannot, they worked together to create a performance "collage". As well as wanting to explore the possibility of providing a platform for its young performers who are no longer "kids", KIC also wanted to expose the young people to an array of different working practices extending beyond those already experienced, and offered infrastructural support in order to develop this.

With this paradigm shift in mind, the broad aim for the work was to support autonomous decision-making based on a largely human rights approach: in this case, to consciously take each of the workshop members on the journey of the performance, and provide a forum to learn and discover together, as each member was required, challenged, and enabled to contribute to the process. The facilitation aimed to provide an environment where performance ideas and movement could be tried out with ample opportunity for each participant to contribute in a number of diverse (multivocal) ways without the pressure to "get it right". Ideas could be explored and decisions made collaboratively in order to create a work-in-progress performance. The whole process was filmed and analysed in order to consider the facilitation methods.

A Note on Ethics

It was an important premise of the practice-based research that the young people could imprint their own "voice" on the work created, and that they were the owners of the content, allowing them to set the agenda of the work. Therefore, the young people, parents and leaders of KIC had been consulted extensively prior to the workshops taking place. The idea of developing leadership potential and a space in which the young people could explore their own "voice" came out of months of observations of KICs work, getting to know the young people, them getting to know me, and talking to parents, participants, workshop leaders and the artistic director at KIC as to what they wanted to achieve through the drama workshops. Additionally, for this project, the young people were instructed in using a video camera which they took home to keep a short video diary prior to the workshops, giving them the opportunity to make a short film. They thus created a piece which did not rely on spoken language (as some of them experienced difficulties in expressing themselves through speech) and was illuminating in demonstrating what was important to them. All of this information was then used to construct both the form and some content of the workshops. In addition, the workshops were designed flexibly as a form of "scaffolding" structure on which to hang the content ideas of the participants so that their ownership of the process could be maximised. At the end of each workshop,

the young people then discussed what to take into the next day and what to discard, allowing them as much control over the processes as possible.

Outline and Methods of the First Workshop Series

During the first workshop series, a variety of visual, aural and kinaesthetic drama exercises catering to a wide range of learning styles was used to engage the young people. Aims were discussed and adapted with the participants as the process unfolded. We also watched the pre-recorded video diaries and discussed their content. Each day began with the participants drawing and contributing to a "graffiti wall", on which they could write comments and/or draw picture contributions. This was followed by a series of workshop games and exercises designed to foster teamwork, to employ diverse learning methods and to create a sense of fun, focus and a safe space to experiment with ideas without the fear of "getting it wrong".

Days one and two had a focus on generating material through image work: mirror work in pairs, in threes and as a whole group gave each participant the chance to lead and to follow everyone else in the group. Still images were created based on key themes, but were also generated in a more abstract way for the sheer pleasure of shaping each other and working with random shapes. The group then used these images as a starting point from which to develop short dance routines. Throughout the week, moments of group "discussion" took place which reflected themes of leadership, role models, power, communication and significant relationships. I use the term "discussion" here to include any form of expression used to comment on the themes: drawing, singing and dancing to illustrate meaning, as well as verbal reasoning. At the end of each day there was a chance to perform to each other and reflect on the day's work. Throughout the week the participants led exercises as they became more familiar with them, thus embodying the key theme of leadership. Day four became a sharing session in which participants performed the material generated so far to a peer group.

Analysis of Practice: Emerging Themes from the First Workshop Series

Although the workshop planning and processes had been developed collaboratively with the young people, the analysis of the work has not been thus far, due to time constraints. This is a flaw in the feedback process, but it is hoped that the development of facilitator techniques will be tested at a later date when the focus will shift to participant feedback and analysis of the methods. It should be taken into account that the analysis that follows is therefore at the point of writing incomplete, being limited to the facilitator response. To reflect this, the first person will therefore be used in commenting upon and analysing the processes involved. Extracts taken from a facilitator "reflective diary" highlighted themes emerging from the workshops of embodiment, communication, group

dynamics/interrelationships within the group, managing the environment and self-management of behaviour by the participants. However, a close data analysis of specific moments filmed within the first workshop series enabled a deeper understanding of both facilitation techniques used and the cognitive and affective responses of participants within the workshop situation.

As a practitioner, facilitator and director, I stand both inside and outside the work, and this raises complications in terms of a framework of analysis. In *Phenomenology of Perception,* Merleau-Ponty (2002) states that it is not possible to both be in the moment and to analyse it at the same time, as this requires distance. Thus, the filmed data allowed me to "live" the experience of facilitating the group in the moment and reflect on the phenomenological experience in diary form, and to cross-reference this with analysis of the filmed data at a later time.

There is a need to look towards embodied methods when working with young people with a learning disability. A different reading of pedagogical practice seemed necessary, reflecting the ways in which the young adults people, learn and interact on the workshop floor. However, in carrying out research with young people with a learning disability, phenomenological readings of the practical research that rely on recording feelings and responses of the participants from their point of view are difficult to obtain verbally, in written form or even physically, without first having carefully set up the premise for this, which was not the focus of the original research. Instead, analysis of participants' affective responses was considered as well as observed moments of cognitive recognition. The close data analysis and the analytical framework developed to interpret the data thus focused on phenomenology in relation to facilitation, and observed affect and cognitive response in relation to workshop participants.

A representative moment within the workshop process was chosen from which to create a close data reading, and from this it was possible to interpret a wealth of information in order to deconstruct facilitative and affective/cognitive processes. Clear trends emerged in the external factors of facilitation (to do with me) and the observations based on internal cognitive and affective responses to external stimuli (to do with the participants). Of course, this is an artificial separation, and internal and external factors are relational and interactive. However, in order to begin reading the data, these were first bracketed separately. A brief summary of these follows.

Findings from the Practice: Facilitative External) processes

1) Using Differentiated Methods Tailored to Individual and Social Needs

Getting to know the individual participants, including their preferences and their learning styles, is vitally important to ensuring their development within the drama process. This blurs the boundaries

of what is normally deemed appropriate in keeping a "professional distance", and the facilitator must be willing to invest their friendship as well as their expertise into the process. Being aware of different ways of communicating, and more importantly being able to judge how to prioritise one method over another at any one given time in relation to individual needs, is an important skill to develop. Reinforcing clear step-by-step aural instructions with visual examples such as modelling of exercises, or inviting participants to explain and demonstrate is essential, but an awareness of how these modes of communication can conflict is equally important. A general awareness of how a specific impairment can impact on the learning and development of participants, and existing methods to facilitate communication is important in helping to determine communication methods to draw upon. However, this should not be applied in order to "limit" what a participant can do but, rather, considered from the point of enabling them to be stretched further. Thus, by knowing individual needs, it is possible to guide the group as a whole to support one another in positive peer relationships.

2) Development of Peer Relationships

The development of supportive peer relationships – where peer relationships are balanced and strengths and weaknesses complement each other – is vital in optimising the creative advancement of the group. This is predicated on knowing individuals and their needs, and an awareness of how the individual processes information best. It is also reliant on facilitating an understanding within the group of how to respond to each other's strengths and weaknesses in a non-judgemental way. Through this, a greater equality of participation can be achieved.

3) Self and Other: Learned Social Behaviour and Image Work

Learned social behaviour that is empowering, and deconstructs psycho-emotional oppression, should be embedded within the work. An interrogation of counter-cultural concepts of status and its hierarchy of importance, social and educational constructs of achievement and failure, and notions of aesthetics within the work are vital in order to challenge disabling attitudes which have been internally assumed. This is a necessary step to take before external, culturally embedded disabling barriers can be removed.

Image work that involves mirroring and copying techniques enables participants to develop a sense of identity, as it develops ideas of self in relation to other. Seeing and recognising oneself reflected in the other serves both to validate one's own creative actions, and to gain a greater understanding of personal identity as separate from the other. This may not have been present to the same extent as non-disabled peers whilst growing up. Developing and consolidating self-identity is a necessary step in developing individual and group voices and confidence in expressing these.

4) Creative Development

In terms of developing young people with disabilities as professional artists, their creative learning is a key component to consider. Once psycho-emotional oppression[2] and notions of identity have been explored, allowing space for individual voices to be heard, the actor has greater autonomy to be creative and develop as an artist. As a result, confidence grows to encounter what may otherwise be perceived as "mistakes" (often the most interesting and creative moments in performance), and to experiment less self-consciously with the performance material. Developing as many opportunities as possible to show work within workshop and devising processes helps to validate contributions and increase confidence. In addition, carefully structuring working processes so that there is a logical progression to the learning processes of individual participants greatly facilitates the development of the work.

Findings from the Practice: Cognitive and Affective Response (Internal Participant Processes)

Definitions of learning disability are diverse and the term learning disability itself is an umbrella term for a whole host of cognitive impairments. As a facilitator, I had a basic understanding of the nature of the impairment that each participant had prior to the workshops. However, the definition of the impairment means little unless it is viewed in relation to the individual. This is in line with Baglieri and Knopf's "Model of Differentiated Instruction", based on a Vygotskian framework, which "effectively guides and supports the learning of students with learning disabilities" (2004: 527). The model supports learning that by "using instructional arrangements that provide opportunities to form co-operative relationships in which students support each other and serve as learning models, students have multiple models and guides to practice and encourage the development of new and emerging abilities." (2004: 527). A comprehensive assessment of cognitive ability prior to getting to know participants is therefore neither possible nor desirable as it can lead to the formulation of reductive and essentialist assumptions.

Although I spent time prior to the workshop series interviewing participants with their families, reliance on the spoken word and interview was not seen as the most appropriate or effective form of dialogue. Analysis of the observational data amassed during the workshops therefore has the potential to provide a more immediate indicator of participant learning and response. Through recording and focusing on visual indicators of a participant's affective response, it was possible to gain

[2] Carol Thomas (1999; 2004c; 2007) and Donna Reeve (2002; 2008) refer to the psycho-emotional impact of disablism on the ontological security or confidence of disabled people, resulting in internalised oppression. This may include, for example, a lowering self-worth and lessening a sense of intrinsic value (Thomas 2007) (Goodley 2011: 90).

an indication of their sense of being within the context.

Affect is important both aesthetically, grounded in work based on emotions and feelings, and in terms of facilitation for "reading" cognition. Focusing on emotions and feelings can help to locate abstract concepts such as communication, leadership and power within the real experience, and help to create an immediacy to the work. The action thus becomes lived, and can invoke emotion and feeling from everyday life. Ideas grounded within the reality of young people with a learning disability are essential to their cognitive understanding, and can act as a starting point for embodied ways of working which allow participants to try out alternative outcomes or explorations. A next step in developing such empowering processes is to consider how participants may not simply utilise an embodied methodology, but how they themselves may use these processes to analyse and generate new ideas in response.

Widening the Scope of the Research: A Swedish Model

There is clearly a need to widen the scope of the research beyond the specifics of the workshops to consider possible implications of the work and further applications. How can the emerging facilitative practice – the phenomenological/external experience of the facilitator in tandem with the observed cognitive and affective/internal responses of the participants – generated through the above analysis be tested in the wider context? What are the applications of this? What kind of wider framework is necessary for these applications to take place? By investigating inclusive practice and reflecting on the work of the Swedish theatre company Moomsteatern, the aim is to address these issues in relation to developing a more widely applicable embodied approach to creative practice.

Following is a brief indication of criticisms that have more recently been levelled against the social model of disability, highlighting the need for greater discussion and a different approach, in particular towards learning disability. This is followed by considerations of the relative model of disability on which Swedish policy and practice is established. The notion put forward here is that this model embraces a more multi-faceted approach to disability policy than that of the United Kingdom, where the social and the medical approaches have been more radically divided.

A "weak/strong" distinction has been used by social model theorists in attempting to construct a new more "sophisticated" version of the social model in response to its critics (Ineland, 2005; Shakespeare & Watson, 2001; Tøssebro & Kittelsaa, 2004). Whilst this may seem at odds with the dichotomous social model perspective, it merely serves to highlight that the social model was never intended as a theory. This classificatory distinction is necessary within a field in which social model theorists have offered different answers to the question of what a commitment to the social model

entails. Shakespeare and Watson, for example, state:

> The issue of impairment was never really ignored. The social model does not really produce such a rigid dichotomy. But our contention is that many British activists in their public discourse use exactly this 'strong' version of the social model that we are critiquing. It may be that in private, their talk is at odds with the 'strong social model'. Most activists concede that behind closed doors they talk about aches and pains and urinary tract infections, even while they deny any relevance of the body while they are out campaigning. (2001:11)

With regard to learning disability, social model theorizing has systematically refused to engage with the issue of intellectual impairment (Goodley, 2011). According to Chappell, Goodley, and Lawthorn, while "writers committed to the social model have applied it with great enthusiasm to physical and sensory impairment…they have neglected people with learning difficulties" (2001:46). Walmsley makes a similar point in stating: "people who write about the social model do not always consider impairments which are located in the brain rather than the body. As a consequence, our understanding of the barriers people with learning difficulties experience is far less developed" (2005: 726).

A further criticism of social model theorizing in relation to learning disability, and interestingly one which can be physically and metaphorically addressed through the workshop processes of drama, is that it does not engage with the issue of embodiment. According to Bhaskar and Danermark, one consequence of the distinction between disability and impairment is that the former has effectively been reduced to a socio-economic issue while the "bodily dimension" of disabled people has "disappeared from the analysis" (2006: 281). The dangers of this failure to theorise impairment is noted by Shakespeare, who argues that by not including the social and cultural dimensions of embodiment it paradoxically concedes that when it comes to understanding the nature of intellectual impairment the medical model has the last word on the subject (2004: 17).

As indicated above, Shakespeare and Watson argue against a "strong version" of the social model of disability, advocating instead for a post-modernist, "embodied ontology" of disability or a "materialist ontology of embodiment" (2001: 9-10). They contend that the social model has become a "dogmatic orthodoxy" that has "outlived its usefulness". At the heart of this critique is the charge that the clear distinction between impairment and disability, is no longer sustainable. According to Shakespeare and Watson, the reality is that "people are disabled both by social barriers and by their bodies. This is straightforward and uncontroversial. The British social model approach, because it "over-eggs the pudding", risks discrediting the entire dish" (2001: 17). Further, a more sophisticated understanding of disability is one which should perceive of it as a "complex dialectic of biological, psychological and socio-political factors" (2001: 24), because people are "disabled both by social barriers and their bodies" (2001: 15).

In contrast, the Swedish relative model of disability (Berg 2005: 36), has been viewed as "weak" (or flexible), because it takes into consideration social context and discriminatory attitudes but does not dislocate these from the individual. (Ineland 2005: 751-752). To cite Berg:

> The social model clearly states that it is society that disables people with impairments; while in the Swedish viewpoint disability is relative, but remains fundamentally a consequence of injury or disease. Even if, the consequences can be limited and sometimes obliterated, the relative model does not cut the causality between impairment and disability as has been the case with the social model (Oliver 1990). Instead, the relative model has been increasingly connected with ICIDH. […] The connection with ICIDH is reinforced and strengthened with its revision and reformulation as ICF. (Berg, 2005: 36)

As indicated by Berg, the Swedish model of disability is more favourable towards the World Health Organisation's ICF than with a socio-political disability studies approach as widely adopted in the United Kingdom. According to Marks, the ontological commitments of the ICF mark a departure from the dualistic thinking that characterizes both the social and medical model. Rather, these are predicated on the view that "mind, body, and environment are not easily separable but rather mutually constitute each other in complex ways" (Marks, 1999: 25). This is of particular importance in consideration of learning disability, where arguably even when all social barriers are removed, the effects of the impairment may still inhibit the ability to function independently. A Swedish relative model therefore seems able to consider both an individual's rights to self-determination and freedom from an oppressive social framework at the same time as respecting the very real obstacles which may be faced by the physical and/or learning impairment.

There have, of course, been proponents of a social relational approach to disability from the United Kingdom, originating with Finkelstein in the 1970s and developed by Carol Thomas since the late 1990s. Thomas modifies the social model definition of disability: "Disability is a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional wellbeing" (Thomas, 1999: 60). Thus, "disability only comes into play when the restrictions of activity experienced by people with impairment are socially imposed" whilst also acknowledging that impairment can restrict activity (Thomas, 2004a: 581). Thomas thus makes the distinction between what she terms "disability effects" and "impairment effects". She also recognises the need for "theorising the socio-biological dynamics associated with different types of impairment" and that these "should occupy a place on the disability studies agenda, something that writers in the learning difficulties field have drawn particular attention to" (Thomas 2004b: 43). To push this relational concept of disability further, it is not just the body that has been erased from the social model of disability, but also the mind.

In sum, within the context of Swedish politics, characterised by stability, progress and reform, long-term policy and collaboration that is "deliberative and rational" (Hancock, 2002: 377), a relational

approach to disability which has been adapted by international rights based legislation and falls in line with the revised ICF appears far more enabling than a social model which divorces the individual body and cognitive capacity from its context.

Context and Observation of Rehearsals at the Theatre Company Moomsteatern

It is within this context of disability that I carried out my observations of the work at Moomsteatern, a company of actors with a learning disability directed by non-disabled staff, founded in 1987 in Malmö, Sweden. There are several reasons why Moomsteatern demonstrates a model of best practice in the field of disability arts, which amongst others include: working methods tailored to the individual and learning needs of the actors they employ; a rights-based approach to working with actors with a learning disability; the collaborative nature of the artistic work created; a risk-taking attitude; and the fact that their actors are employed through culturally funded means (rather than social funds), at industry standard rates. The aim of the research in Sweden was to observe and explore the cultural context of the work with the theatre company in order to glean insight into what is necessary to further the careers of young actors with a learning disability in Northern Ireland. All too often, Northern Ireland has culturally been equated with the rest of United Kingdom, and has historically been politically and culturally assimilated into Westminster politics and British culture on the world stage. It was felt that comparison with a non-UK model of practice which is integrated into a supportive socio-political structure, would be far enough removed to allow for a comparison without recourse to cultural and political assumptions.

I joined the rehearsal process with the company as an observer/researcher for five weeks in April and May 2012. Three young actors aged 20-24 were completing their formal training in collaboration with the Theatre College, Malmö, after a two year process. During the five weeks, I kept a daily blog of the rehearsals observed (www.shadowingthemooms.wordpress.com) and filmed some of the work. The analysis of the observations followed the same process as my own practice based research, namely that of using the data to assess external (facilitative) processes and internal (cognitive and affective) responses, from which the following themes emerged. Originally categorized separately, the relational aspects of these themes are highlighted below, as the boundaries between them appeared more blurred than in my own practice.

Findings

1) On Facilitation

What is interesting to note is that the direction from facilitators presented itself predominantly as subtle gestures: a look, a touch, a nod. In fact, the only time the action was interrupted by facilitative

intervention was when verbal instruction was given. There seemed to be four modes of facilitation evident: observational facilitation – watching, alert, indirect (could be termed latent facilitation); indicational facilitation – using subtle gesture such as a look or a touch in order to gently direct (could be termed indicative facilitation*)*; direct leadership – taking an active lead in demonstrating the direction of the action (direct or active facilitation); and verbal instruction – the focus is broken from physical to cognitive processing (verbal facilitation).

Within the processes at Moomsteatern there is less of a distinction between "facilitator" and "actor" than within the examples of my own practice: although the facilitator was observed to be checking on the action, she stood very much within the rehearsal process, indistinct from the other actors. There were also times when the actors took the role that the facilitator had as "director" or "leader". There seemed to be a direct relationship between the facilitator "being in the action" and the actor "embodying the action"; "being in the action" by the facilitator seemed to be the process necessary in order for the actor to produce "embodied action". This suggests a symbiotic relational dialogue happening between the external and the internal emanating from the close relationship between the facilitator's instruction and the resulting embodiment by the actor.

2) On Learning

The close relationship between facilitator and facilitated, and being in the action and embodying the action, contribute to neutralizing the power differential between disabled and non-disabled. In part this is predicated on the learning environment created on the workshop floor. Processes are built into, and attitudes reflect, a learning environment for all stakeholders: it is expected that everyone will undergo a learning experience. Evaluation, feedback and self-reflection are embedded into the work, and all players are expected to contribute to this.

One of the ways in which Moomsteatern creates opportunities for what I would term symbiotic (mutual) learning is to bring in outside directors who have experience of working in the commercial and/or academic world of theatre, but little or no experience of working with disability. The idea behind this practice is that learning takes place through "inclusive" ways of working, which in practice have been seen historically to reinforce power discrepancies. Moomsteatern's aim is not to shy away from collaborative work between disabled and non-disabled performers and professionals, but to dive into this problem and find ways to interrogate the arising discrepancies.

Less problematic in terms of inclusive working are the internal company relationships between non-disabled Moomsteatern facilitator-actors and disabled actors. Power dynamics within this context are interesting as the facilitators are not trained performers, and the performers need prompting in

their actions (ie both have areas of weakness), so the relationship between the non-disabled and disabled actors is more of mutual learning and support – they rely on each other to be successful. There seems to be an equal focus on improving both the non-disabled and disabled performances, and the learning environment allows for exploration and discovery, rather than achieving any predetermined goal.

3) On Peer Support

Linked to the symbiotic learning environment and the close relationship between being in and embodying the action are the nature of the peer relationships between the actors. The actors actively sought direction on the workshop floor from both non-disabled facilitators and their disabled contemporaries. This environment encourages an understanding of where and when to seek leadership. This reinforces the development of strong peer relationships in which actors look to each other to learn.

Conclusion: Lessons Learned for a Model of Best Practice

Processes of drama and theatre which have participatory, dialogic and dialectic qualities encourage effective and democratic ways of learning for all participants, disabled and non-disabled alike, thus actively working against psycho-social forms of oppression. A greater focus on the role of the facilitator and non-disabled agents in enabling young people with a learning disability is essential. A framework of analysing the facilitation processes has been offered which considers both phenomenological aspects of the (external) facilitative processes, and (internal) affective responses of participants. This has the potential to be adapted and developed as a reflexive tool for facilitators across disciplines, and also for participants, thus contributing to their development as artists in their own right. Further research into and development of different modes of facilitation (as indicated in the observations at Moomsteatern) may prove particularly useful.

Whilst it is useful to separate the external (facilitative) processes from the internal (cognitive and affective responses) of the participants in order to analyse the function of each within the workshop situation, it is also a false separation. In order to create inclusive processes where a more equal power dynamic is at play, processes need to be seen as relational and symbiotic within a shared learning environment, as demonstrated by the work at Moomsteatern.

The observations made at Moomsteatern were of an inclusive model of practice, which was by no means perfect. The company provides a learning environment – which by its very nature is founded on experimentation, and the understanding that things can go “wrong” as well as “right”. In short, risks are taken. The effect of this approach, however, is one in which everyone has something

to learn, and therefore roles, power differences and boundaries between them become blurred.

In order to transfer some of the lessons learned in Sweden to create an environment where young people with a learning disability can explore their maximum potential for arts practice in Northern Ireland, and further afield, a shift in attitude is necessary in approaching the practical facilitation of actors with a learning disability. This means moving from separating disability and impairment, disabled and non-disabled, as has been experienced by a "stronger" social model of disability (as outlined by Shakespeare and Watson, 2001), towards a model which is less doctrinaire in its politics, less reductive in its ontological commitments and thus paradoxically a more useful framework for the empowerment of people with a learning disability.

What form this would take – whether it is a relative social model such as that advocated by Thomas, which gives greater acknowledgement to individual impairment, or whether there is a need to research in more depth a framework more relevant to the needs of people with a learning disability – is the subject matter for a different paper. What is clear, however, is that existing models don't adequately take into consideration the need that adults with a learning disability have for non-disabled facilitators, within most aspects of their everyday lives. A more fluid interpretation of impairment and disability, which considers a wide-range of models and approaches is needed, as well as greater theorisation of disability from social relational perspectives stemming from outside the boundaries of a "strong" social model of disability. Finally, there needs to be a shift in acknowledging the importance of building relationships, and engaging in symbiotic learning and co-creation which encourages exploration and mistakes from all partners, both within and beyond inclusive arts practice.

Suffice to say, whatever form this new or amended relative social approach to disability might take, it should facilitate a practice of "working together" predicated on recognizing our own mistakes and vulnerabilities (not just those of "vulnerable young people") necessary for meaningful and mutual learning to take place. Methods and techniques of applied drama which are "embodied, culturally located and socially distributed" (Nicholson 2005: 39), producing knowledge through interaction with others, enable the generation of new forms of social and cultural capital, which may just help to indicate how this model of "working together" should come about. Thus, within the processes of drama and theatre, we may find a starting point to locate a practice which empowers young people with a learning disability to become the professional artists of tomorrow.

References

Baglieri, S., & Knopf, J. H. (2004). Normalizing difference in inclusive teaching. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 37, 525–529.

Berg, S. (2005). Personal Assistance Reforms in Sweden: Breaking the assumption of dependency? Adapted from C. Barnes & G. Mercer (Eds.), *The Social Model of Disability: Europe and the majority world* (pp. 32-48). Leeds: The Disability Press.

Bhaskar, R., & Danermark, B. (2006). Metatheory, interdisciplinarity and disability research: A critical realist perspective. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 8, 278-297.

Boal, A. (2002). *Games for actors and non-actors* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Chappell, A. L., Goodley, D. & Lawthom, R. (2001). Connecting with the social model: The relevance of the social model of disability for people with learning difficulties. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 29(2) 45–50

Gee, E. & Hargrave, M. (2011). A proper actor? The politics of training for learning disabled actors. *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training,* 2(1), 34-53.

Goodley, D. (2011). *Disability studies: An interdisciplinary introduction.* London: SAGE.

Goodley, D. & Moore, M. (2002). *Disability Arts Against Exclusion.* Kidderminster: Bild Publications.

Hancock, M.D. (2002). Sweden. In, M. D. Hancock, D. P. Conradt, B. G. Peters, W. Safran, S. White, & R. Zariski, *Politics in Europe* (3rd ed., pp. 346-401). Basingstoke; Palgrave Macmillan.

Heron, J., & Reason, P. (2006). The practice of cooperative inquiry: research 'with' rather than 'on' people. In P. Reason& H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (pp. 144-154). London: Sage.

Ineland, J. (2005). Logics and discourses in disability arts in Sweden: A neo-institutional perspective. *Disability and Society,* 20 749-762.

Marks, D. (1999). *Disability: Controversial debates and psychosocial perspectives.* London: Routledge.

McNiff, J., Lomax, P.,& Whitehead, J. (2002). *You and your action research* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002). *Phenomenology of perception.* London: Routledge.

Nicholson, H. (2005). *Applied drama: The gift of theatre.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Perring, G. (2005). Facilitation of learning disabled arts. In C. Sandahl& P. Auslander (Eds.), *Bodies in Commotion* (pp.175-189). Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

Reeve, D. (2002). Negotiating psycho-emotional dimensions of disability and their influence on identity constructions. *Disability & Society*, 17, 493–508.

Reeve, D. (2008). Negotiating disability in everyday life: The experience of psycho-emotional disablism(unpublished PhD thesis, Lancaster).

Shakespeare, T. (2004). Social models of disability and other life strategies. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 6(1), 8-21.

Shakespeare, T., &Watson, N. (2001). The social model of disability: An outdated ideology? *Research in Social Science and Disability*, 2(2), 9-28.

Thomas, C. (1999). *Female forms: Experiencing and understanding disability.* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Thomas, C. (2004a). How is disability understood? *Disability and Society,* 19 569-583.

Thomas, C. (2004b). Developing the social relational in the aocial model of disability: A theoretical agenda. In C.Barnes & G. Mercer (Eds.), *Implementing the social model of disability: Theory and research* (pp. 32-47). Leeds: The Disability Press.

Thomas, C. (2004c). Rescuing a social relational understanding of disability. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 6(1), 22-36.

Thomas, C. (2007). *Sociologies of disability, 'impairment', and chronic illness: Ideas in disability studies and medical sociology.* London: Palgrave.

Tøssebro, J., & Kittelsaa, A. (2004). Studying the living conditions of disabled people: Approaches and problems. In J. Tøssebro & A. Kitellsaa (Eds.), *Exploring the living conditions of disabled people* (pp. 17-43). Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Walmsley, J. (2005). Research and emancipation: Prospects and problems. In G. Grant, P. Goward, M. Richardson& P. Ramcharan (Eds.), *Learning disability: A life cycle approach to valuing people* (pp. 724-744). New York: Open University Press.

Wooster, R. (2009). Creative inclusion in community theatre: A journey with Odyssey Theatre. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 14(1), 79-90.